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Nevaeh

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‘You’re not drinking today,’ Lindy says, eying my coffee mug.

I raise my eyebrows as if to say, and?

-And-

She shrugs in response. ‘I asked your father for a weekend off. It won’t be for a couple of weeks yet, but I’m giving you a heads-up now.’

‘Fine,’ I muttered, relieved that she dropped the topic of my drinking.

I’ve been telling myself all morning I’m laying off the whiskey because of my headache. Not because a certain green-eyed girl has made me all too aware that I might be using alcohol for all the wrong reasons.

‘Mick is taking some time off too,’ Lindy says, heading toward the door. ‘We’re headed to Pittsburgh for a little getaway. Your father offered to get us a hotel. Thought we’d go to the movies. Have someone cook for me for a change.’

Wait, what? My father is giving his employees free vacations now? And the two of them are taking it together? I try to think back to the times I've seen Mick and Lindy together. Not often, but then I make a point of ignoring everyone as often as possible. Are they - you know? Good for them if they are. At least someone should be getting some.

'Cool,' I say.

Lindy purses her lips. 'You'll be fine. For food and stuff. I mean, it won't be my cooking, but…'

Technically she’s talking to me, but I know from her tone she’s trying to reassure herself that she’s not abandoning me.

I give her a look. ‘Do you have any idea what they feed soldiers in Afghanistan? I’ll be fine.’

‘Olivia tells us she’s handy enough around the kitchen,’ Lindy responds, as though she didn’t hear me. ‘I’m sure you can survive on scrambled eggs or grilled cheese, or whatever she has in her repertoire.’

Olivia.

Me and Olivia.

Alone. In the house.

Olivia in itty-bitty pajamas, with full breasts and long, toned legs.

Olivia with her don't-freak-with-me green eyes and lips that taste better than the most expensive Scotch on the market.

I won't survive it.

'Whatever,' I mutter.

I keep one eye on the door as I eat, half expecting Olivia to come barging in with that Andrew Jackson

book she’s about two pages into, insisting that we share a meal. But the door stays shut. The house stays quiet.

After lunch, I try to read, but I can’t concentrate. Instead, I head to the gym. Usually, I hit the gym first thing in the morning, after I walked along the water and before my shower, but I didn’t have the energy this morning. Not after last night.

The gym is, admittedly, ridiculous. It’s huge by normal standards, but considering that only one person uses it, it’s downright

absurd. Mick and Lindy are welcome to use it, but they're not exactly fitness buffs. It's just me.

I move steadily through my routine, relishing the familiar burn as I push my upper body to the limit. The truth is, from the waist up, I'm in better shape than I was at the peak of my military training, and that's saying something. On some level, I guess I know that it has to do with overcompensating for the bad leg, but I don't give a sh*t.

For some reason, I can’t stop thinking about my leg today, all too aware that it’s only going to get weaker and weaker. I keep it in usable shape by taking my daily walks. I’m not a complete idiot. I might not buy any of that physical therapy bullsh*t, but I know that unused limbs atrophy and all that. But I draw the line at any lower-body exercises in here, even for my good leg. It’s too much of a reminder of where I used to be, and where I’ll never be again. No squats. No lifts. No leg presses -

I push the thought aside, and with the last grunt, I finish my set of presses. I lie on my back on the bench, chest heaving.

‘You’re going to wind up hideously out of proportion if you keep that up.’

The voice is unexpected, and I sit up so quickly that I almost hit my head on the bar.

Olivia.

She’s wearing a sports bra and matching athletic shorts in - wait for it -

pink. There's an iPod in her hand and a water bottle under her arm. She's here to use the gym herself, not to hound me. Probably could have figured that out from the way she looks. The boobs might be God-given, but the rest of her has been well earned.

She moves toward me, and although her ponytail is as perky as ever, she has shadows under her eyes and her expression is more guarded than it was yesterday.

She's put walls between us, keeping me at a distance.

I feel a flash of regret, even as I mentally congratulate her. And myself.

Mission accomplished, asshole.

‘You’re going to be disproportionate,’ she repeats. ‘All bulky and ridiculous on top, and scrawny on the bottom.’

‘I’m not scrawny,’ I say immediately. Why are we talking about this instead of last night?

She comes closer, reaching out a hand and plucking at the fabric of my pants. She raises an eyebrow. ‘Yeah?

When was the last time you wore shorts?’

I lift my eyebrows right back. ‘You saw me in boxers last night. Did you see scrawny?’

She snatches her hand back. ‘We’re not talking about last night.’

‘I thought you’d be back in New York by now. Or at least all up my face demanding an apology.’

Her expression never changes. ‘I thought about it. But I need some distance from New York, and I know

better than to expect an apology, so -’ She holds out her arms as though to say, here we are, deal with it.

Her matter-of-fact reaction to last night pisses me off. She should be demanding an apology- what the hell is wrong with her that she isn’t? Even more annoying - why do I want to give one?

‘When was the last time you did any sort of lower-body workout?’ she asks, oblivious to my inner turmoil.

I snatch her water bottle and take a long drink as I study her. ‘Not your business.’

She pretends to think about this. ‘Oh, wait for a second, actually it is my business. If you want, I can get you my job description. It specifically says-’

‘I’m sure it does,’ I interrupt. ‘But you can go ahead and scratch that physical portion off because I’m not doing it.’

‘Ten leg lifts,’ she says calmly, ignoring me.

‘What?’ I ask, annoyed, as I get into a standing position. ‘No way.’

‘We can start them easy. No weight at all.’

‘I’m going back to the house,’ I mutter, leaning down to grab my towel.

She moves in front of me. ‘Five. Leg lifts.’

I roll my eyes. ‘You’re a terrible negotiator. You lower your price too quickly even before you’ve offered an enticing reward.’

‘I’m not haggling with you for the thrill of it. I’m just trying to do my job.’ She puts her hands on her hips. It reminds me that my hands were in that very spot not so long ago. And that I want them to be there again.

I tear my eyes away from the enticing points of her hip bone.

‘Why is this your job?’ I ask.

She jerks her shoulders back a little, defensively. Interesting. ‘What?’

‘Why is coaxing me to work my sh*t leg your job of choice? My little

recon exercise says you were a marketing major. Didn't Daddy want you in the lucrative family business?'

Her eyes flit away from mine. 'Sure. That was the original plan.'

'What changed?' I ask, surprised to realize that I'm genuinely interested.

'Life,' she snaps. 'And we're not talking about me.'

'Obviously, we are,' I counter, taking another gulp of her water.

She opens her mouth, probably to tell me to f*ck off, but then she seems to reconsider. She tilts her head, and just then I realize exactly what I've set myself up for.

'I'll trade you one question for ten leg lifts.'

'Nope,' I reply, already turning around. 'No way.'

'Come on,' she says, scooting around to get in front of me. 'Don't you want to know why a hot twenty-two-year-old with everything going for her is hiding out here in Maine?'

I give her a glance over my shoulder. ‘Did you just call yourself hot?’

Olivia smiles a gotcha smile. ‘Aren’t I?’

I flick my eyes over her. Yes. ‘Maybe.’

‘So, you’re in? Ten leg lifts for one question?’

I hesitate, even though my brain is demanding I walk away now. ‘Will I get the real story?’ I ask. ‘Or some bullsh*t evasion?’

‘I’ll give you a true statement, but no guarantees that it’s the whole story. Final offer.’

‘Not good enough.’

She sighs. ‘How about I’ll give you a true statement, and I’ll let you give me running pointers tomorrow?’

I put a hand on my chest. ‘I can’t believe this is happening. All my dreams are coming true.’

‘You in or out, Langdon?’

Walk away. Walk the hell away.

Her green eyes are practically bursting with a challenge. And, even more intriguing, secrets.

‘Freak it. I’m in.’

Olivia-

Yeah, okay. So, agreeing to answer Paul Langdon’s questions isn’t going to go into my Good Choices Hall of Fame. But to be fair, I’ve been pretty short on good choices lately, so this feels about par for the course.

However, that doesn’t make it any easier to think about the possibility

of spilling my guts, even though I fully intend to censor the heck out of whatever truth I have to give him.

For a second, I'm about to back out and tell him there's no way I'm going to spill my guts just to bribe him to do something he should have started a long time ago.

But then I see the tension on his face when he looks at the waiting leg-press machine. He's nervous. I mean, he's pissed too, because I'm guessing I'm not the only one who's

furious about getting back into a corner.

But it’s not Paul’s anger that has me swallowing my pride and pushing on with our agreement, even at the expense of my privacy. It’s his unease.

He’s afraid of failing.

As he starts to head toward the leg-press machine like it’s the guillotine, I mentally throw away the bubblegum pep talk that I figure is written in the Caretaker 101 textbook for this type of situation. We’re

supposed to be our client's cheerleaders, but this guy needs something entirely different. Acting entirely on instinct, my hand reaches out and gives him a sharp smack on the ass.

He halts, throwing me an incredulous look over his shoulder. His very nice, very sculpted shoulder, by the way.

'What was that?' He snaps.

I shrug as though touching his firm and, um, perfect ass cheek is no big deal.

‘Thought you needed a little encouragement.’

He lifts his eyebrows. ‘Oh, I could use some encouragement.

Why don’t I show you what sort of encouragement would rev my engines?’ His eyes drop to my chest, and my nipples tighten in response.

Well - crap. That backfired.

I shoo- him forward. ‘Chop-chop, Langdon. I don’t have all day. Women need to exercise too.’

He gives me an understanding nod. ‘Kegels. I get it.’

I make a face and jab a finger at the bench. ‘Sit.’

There’s no fear on his face anymore. It’s perfectly blank, as though he’s preparing himself for failure.

‘Okay,’ I say, moving over to the machine, grateful that my mom- had me going to a personal trainer since I was sixteen. Sort of psycho, now that I think about it, but at least I know my way around weight machines.

His right leg immediately falls into place, but he hesitates before moving his left leg into position. He's wearing blue sweatpants, so I can't see his injured leg, and although I hate to admit it, I'm kind of glad.

Granted, I could have looked at it- last night when I barged in on him in his boxers, but I had more important things to worry about. Like the fact that the guy had some seriously messed-up dreams. And that he knew his way all too well around my body in way too short a time.

‘Olivia -’

‘Don’t apologize,’ she says quietly. ‘I shouldn’t have tried. I’m sorry.’

She reaches down to pick up the purse that she dropped and scoops her keys off the counter. ‘Mick said I could borrow one of the cars. I won’t be late, but I have my cell if you need anything.’ She heads toward the door.

‘Wait,’ I say, moving toward her.

Olivia pauses, giving me a look over her shoulder. ‘What?’

‘I -I…’

I have no freaking idea what I’m trying to say. I don’t know if I want to tell her to stay or have fun, or something even more godawful and unimaginable, like begging her to take me with her.

Take me with you on a Friday night where there are people and beers and laughter and sh*tty music, and my old friend Kali.

But I say none of those things, especially not the last one.

I don’t go out. Not anymore.

‘Thanks for making me dinner,’ I say gruffly.

This time she doesn’t even turn around. ‘Just doing my job, Langdon.’

Olivia-

I’ve never been to a bar by myself.

And I can’t say I’ve ever imagined my first foray into solo drinking being at a tiny local bar on the

outskirts of Bar Harbor, Maine. But tonight, I force myself.

Lately, I've been terrified that Paul's reclusiveness will be contagious. Like if I don't get some outside human interaction, I'll turn into a hostile turd like him, and become this wretched beast who doesn't have to be accountable to anyone for my pissed moods.

That's only part of the reason I left the house tonight. Truthfully? I hoped he'd come with me. Not that I asked. I intentionally didn't ask, being

stupid enough to imagine that the thought of being left all alone might be enough to spur Paul into leaving the house of his own volition.

I planned to make it look very much like I wanted him to stay. I made what Google claimed to be the Ultimate World-Famous Chili, avoided him all day (actually, he avoided me first, but whatever,) and I dressed carefully in an outfit intended to be sexy but understated. You know, a girl going out on the town for her amusement, but if

she happened to meet a cute guy, then hey, why not?

But Paul didn't take the bait. I guess I should count it as progress that he even came out of his lair in search of food, but the truth is, I'm disappointed. It's just not right for a twentysomething guy to be cooped up in the house for years. How long until all of that isolation turns him into one of those weird hermits who can't function in normal society even if he wanted to?

I'm parked outside of Frenchy's. I want to turn right back

around and go home, but Lindy's lecture from earlier that afternoon is still rattling around in my brain. Just because he wants to pretend, he's dead doesn't mean you have to. We may not be New York City, but we have good people here. Work your thing, sister.

Okay, so the talk had been half sweet, half awkward, but Lindy made a good point. I don't want to end up like Paul: socially stunted and on a one-way street toward freakdom.

I get out of the car.

From the outside, Frenchy's- I assume the name comes from its location on Frenchman Bay- looks like a combination of a ski lodge and roadside dive. The wood beams give it a homey, welcoming feeling, while the smattering of neon beer signs in the windows lends just the right amount of bar vibe. On the right side of the building is a covered deck, which I imagine is the place to be on a clear summer's day, but in late September it's deserted. However, the faint thump of music shows that inside, at least, there's some activity.

I take a deep breath and open the door.

My worst-case scenario is that the entire place falls silent as everyone turns to stare at the newcomer. The best case is nobody notices me and I can find a bar stool, preferably on the end, where I can sit and get my bearings.

The reality is somewhere in between. The old-school rock music rocks on as I step inside, and although the majority of the clientele is far enough along in whiskey and beer to be

oblivious to my arrival, people at the handful of tables nearest the door turn to glance at me. And then glance a second time.

Lindy assured me that this was a local hangout, a place where I'd fit right in, but I think she may have been forgetting the not-so-tiny detail that I'm not exactly a local. I don't fit right in. Not even a tiny bit.

Even if my clothes don't scream city girl (which they do,) I stand out just by being a girl at all. I count maybe five women, sure, but the

majority of the clientele is men. Fishermen, judging from the attire.

Still, it’s not quite the painful scene I was fearing. It’s uncomfortable, sure, but most of the looks are curious, not lecherous or leering. I give a tentative smile to a middle-aged couple, and the woman gives me a half-smile back as her companion turns back to his phone and beer, totally disinterested.

Although there are plenty of available tables, sitting alone at a table somehow seems a little too lonely

considering I’m after human companionship, so I make my way to a cluster of empty bar stools.

Almost immediately a glass of water is in front of me, followed by a white paper coaster with Frenchy’s scribbled across the middle in a no-nonsense font.

‘What can I get yah?’ Asks a friendly voice.

The bartender is a cute brunette with freckles and warm honey-brown eyes.

Her hair pulled up in one of those messy buns that some girls make look adorable. She's one of those girls.

'Um, white wine?' I ask, hoping it's not a terrible faux pas in a place like this.

'I've got a chardonnay or a pinot grigio. The chard's way better.'

'I'll have that, then,' I say, returning her friendly smile.

She plunks a glass in front of me before heading to the fridge and pulling out the wine bottle.

‘Not a lot of wine drinkers?’ I ask, noticing that the bottle is unopened.

She shrugs. ‘Beer’s the drink of choice, but more people are getting wine now that I got rid of the sugar swill they used to serve here.’

‘Oh, wow,’ I say as she fills my glass way beyond the typical pour.

‘You look like you need it,’ she says with a wink before sliding back down the bar to check on the other patrons.

She’s right on two fronts- the chardonnay is delicious, and I do need it.

I watch the bartender out of the corner of my eye. She chats up an old guy at the end of the bar, she laughs long and genuine as he tells her some story about his grandson’s antics.

Lindy didn’t describe the mysterious Kali to me beyond saying that she’s a ‘good sort,’ but the age is about right, and I wonder if this is Paul’s childhood summer friend.

When she makes her way toward me again to refill my water, I get up the nerve to ask.

‘Yeah, I’m Kali,’ she says, looking a little surprised by the question. ‘Have we met?’

‘Nope, I’m new to the area.’

‘Yeah, I guessed that by the silk shirt,’ she says in a confidential whisper.

‘I’m betting it costs more than a car payment for most of us here. Tourist?’

‘Sort of,’ I hedged. ‘I’m working over at the Langdon house.’

Her smile slips. ‘Paul’s place?’

‘Yeah.’

She stands up straighter, her palms flat against the bar as she studies me, almost protective. ‘You don’t look like Langdon employee material.’

Her tone isn’t unkind, but it’s clear I’m being evaluated. ‘What do I look like?’

She shrugs. ‘A few years ago- I would have pegged you as girlfriend material for Paul. But now…?’

We make eye contact and have one of those weird moments of female understanding. We both know he doesn’t do girlfriends anymore. ‘I’m the new caregiver,’ I say quietly. ‘Although that word never quite feels right.’

‘Yeah, Paul’s never really been one to be taken care of. At least, not as I remember him.’

I lean forward a little, desperate to keep her talking, but not

wanting to come off as prying. ‘You haven’t seen him since he came back?’

She shakes her head and needlessly tops off my wine glass- a good sign that she’s not trying to get rid of me. ‘Nah. My folks’ place isn’t too far from his house. The Langdon used to rent that place where they live, you know. Paul’s father only bought it a couple of years ago when he needed a full-time, um, retreat for Paul. I live closer to town now, but back when we were kids, I lived for the day when Paul

would show up for those couple of weeks in the summer.'

I quickly stamp down the surge of jealousy. They were just kids, for God's sake. Friends. At least I think they were just friends. And not that it's any of my business if they were more.

'He knows you're here tonight?' she asks, her tone casual. Too casual. I know what she's asking: Why hasn't he come to see me?

'He, um - he's not so much the social type,' I say.

‘Yeah,’ she mutters. ‘I gathered that after getting turned away at the door every day for a month after he moved in.’

My heart twists a little at the sadness in her voice.

What the hell, Paul? It’s clear to me now that he’s friendless and alone because he wants to be. Not because everybody shunned him.

‘How’s he doing?’ she asks. ‘I mean, we all hear things, but you know small towns and their rumors. It’s hard to pull out the facts.’

‘He’s probably about like you’ve heard,’ I say, maintaining eye contact.

‘Rude, angry, and generally unpleasant.’

‘Well now,’ a low voice says from behind me. ‘There’s something to make a guy’s heart skip a beat.’

I freeze at the familiar voice. Too late I realize that the place has grown mostly quiet, save for the music. I turn around and realize that the awkward staring I’ve been expecting has finally commenced.

Only they’re not staring at me.

They’re staring at Paul.

His eyes hold mine for several seconds, his thumb doing that slow stroking over the head of his cane before his eyes move over my shoulder and lock on the girl behind the bar. ‘Hey, Kali.’

Please don’t reject him, I silently beg of her. Please understand how big a moment this is for him.

I don’t know if she hears my unspoken plea or if she’s just a good

sort of person because she doesn't throw a beer in his face or make any kind of snotty remark. Instead, she launches herself across the bar and winds her arms around his neck. It's a hug. The stunning look of pleasure on his face almost breaks my heart.

When Kali releases him, Paul gives an almost shy smile and starts to sit on the stool to my right, but then inexplicably moves around to sit on the other side of me.

The pressure in my chest tightens as I realize what he's just

done. He’s intentionally sat with the scarred side of his face toward me, his good side facing everyone else.

He trusts me.

The realization makes me ridiculously warm.

‘What can I get you?’ Kali asks. ‘Last time we drank together; it was sneaking citrus vodka out of your dad’s liquor cabinet.’

Paul laughs. ‘I’ve graduated. How about whiskey and Coke?’

Kali plops the drink down in front of him before reluctantly moving back down the bar to attend to a gesturing patron.

Several people are still looking our way and whispering, but Paul seems determined to ignore them, and I follow suit.

‘So, my chili was that bad?’ I ask, taking a sip of my wine.

He stabs at his ice with the stir stick. ‘I had some. It wasn’t awful.’

‘It was amazing, and you know it. Take back what you said about me not being able to cook.’

The corner of his mouth turns up slightly. ‘I found a sandwich in the fridge. I’m guessing you made it for lunch and then took it away because I was hiding like a little b*tch?’

I tap my nose. Bingo.

He smirks. ‘Well, I had a bite of the sandwich. Completely pedestrian.’

‘It was turkey and cheddar on wheat. What the hell were you

expecting for lunch, some sort of asiago soufflé and escarole salad?'

Paul snorts. 'Your New York is showing.'

He has a point. I've long been part of the high-priced wine bar and frou-frou café set. Asiago soufflés used to be part of an average Wednesday. Even though

I've been holed up here in Maine for all of a few weeks, those days feel like they were forever ago. It somehow feels exactly right to be perched on this worn leather stool at a

wooden bar that looks older than I am, sitting next to a guy who's a one-part beautiful mystery and one-part unpredictable beast.

'You can relax,' I say quietly. 'Everyone's gone back to their business.'

'Only because they can't see the scars from this angle. If they could, they'd be heading toward the door or puking up their onion rings.'

'I see them, and I'm not running toward the door.'

His eyes flick to mine then, and for a second there's this moment between us.

She comes back and the moment's gone. I don't resent her. Not really. She represents a normal side of Paul that I haven't been able to access- his pre- Afghanistan self. And her response to his new appearance couldn't have been more perfect.

It's official: I don't get women.

Olivia should be pissed at me. Just a few hours ago, I would have sworn that she was. But now she's

changing it up, and I don't like it at all. I don't trust forgiveness I didn't earn.

The weird thing is, I never used to be so clueless with girls. I won't pretend that I'm a mind reader or anything, but of course, I know that fine never means fine, and if you ask a girl if you can skip a date to go to a Red Sox game with your friends, she will probably say, 'Go ahead,' which means you're a dead man.

I've had a few girlfriends. Only one was serious. Serious enough that we did the long-distance thing when I

went to Afghanistan. When I got back, a well-meaning nurse told me that Ashley had come by to see me, once.

Honestly, I don't blame her for not sticking around after she saw my mangled face. My scars are ugly now, but early on when the wounds were fresh, I was downright grotesque.

My dad mentioned that Ashley got married to the son of one of his vice presidents and had twins. I don't know if he meant it to be a wake-up call or what, but the truth is I didn't feel much of anything when he told me.

The point is, I used to know girls. But this thing with Olivia is a whole other ball game.

Sometime in the past hour, she's gone from acting like I'm a ticking bomb to being, well, friendly. This is not to say that she's been unfriendly. In a couple of weeks since I basically called her a useless hooker and then threw her ex-boyfriend in her face, leaving her to cry alone at night (is there a gold medal for assholes? I've earned it,) Olivia hasn't done the prissy

silent treatment thing, and I give her props for that.

But even though she's been perfectly civil, things have been different.

The conversation is shallower. She never touches me anymore, not even accidentally.

More often than not she avoids prolonged eye contact, and she's taken to 'reading alone' in the afternoons so she can concentrate.

I should be thrilled. I accomplished my goal of distance quite easily. It's supposed to feel like a reward. Instead, it feels an awful lot like punishment.

I miss her…

But that's not to say that there aren't alarm bells going off in my head right now. Because without warning, the old Olivia is back. And I'm way too relieved for comfort.

Her long, slim fingers appear in front of my face and she snaps rapidly

three times. ‘Yo… Langdon. A toddler can do more squats than you. Focus.’

See what I mean? Old Olivia… The sassy version who doesn’t treat me like an invalid. We’re in the gym, and she’s doing her tough-love physical trainer thing, which is both annoying and cute as hell.

Her hair is pulled into a high, perky fountain, reminding me a little of a cheerleader, and she’s wearing purple instead of the usual pink. Except for the shoes. The shoes are still pink. She insists on wearing the old pink

ones on days when she doesn't run because she has a limit on how many days per week, she's willing to look like, and I quote, 'a freaking hobo.'

What she's wearing doesn't matter, though. Because she's got me right where she wants me.

I'm doing squats.

With weight. Not much weight, and nothing even close to what I was managing before the ambush. But the steady, repetitive bend-and-straighten motion isn't something I imagined

doing ever again in any capacity. My leg doesn't even hurt. Much.

I refocus my efforts, and with Olivia looking on, I finish the last set of reps.

She grins, making it all worth it. 'How'd it feel…?'

'Sh*tty,' I say, doing my best to resist her good mood.

She takes a step closer. I step back, but I'm pinned in by the weight machine. The little minx has me

cornered. She scoots up nice and close. In other words, torment.

‘Liar,’ she says. ‘It feels good, and you know it.’

Christ. Is she talking about the exercise or her nearness? Because one felt great, but the other is bittersweet agony.

Her eyes flick to my lips just briefly before she takes a step back.

My eyes narrow. She’s up to something.

‘I don’t suppose- I could talk you into doing my yoga routine with me?’ she asks, rolling her shoulders as though to loosen them.

‘Hell, no,’ I mutter. ‘I’ve got nothing against yoga. It’s just that watching you do yoga is a good deal more interesting than participating.’

Her eyes go dark, and I smile in satisfaction. Two can play this game.

But by the time she unrolls her yoga mat- pink- and starts with the now-familiar poses, it’s clear that she’s winning. Watching Olivia do yoga is, in

fact, interesting, but it's also tormenting. Is it just my imagination, or is she holding that downward-facing dog position just a second longer than necessary? And I'm pretty sure I don't remember that position where she arches her back quite like that from previous days.

Those damned tight yoga pants girls like to wear are tempting enough when they're not doing yoga. But when her butt's in the air all tight and cute?

Sh*t. By the time she contorts herself into something that's her

grabbing her ankles, I'm f*cking sweating.

Is there a yoga position that involves her beneath me, hands pinned above her head, clothing-optional? Because then I might rethink her yoga offer. By the time she's finished, I'm hard, even though I've been pretending to be adjusting the weights on one of the machines. She carefully ignores me. I ignore her right back as I move to refill my water bottle.

She tucks her yoga mat under her arm and we move toward the door together.

So, she says, her voice easy and sweet. Too sweet. I instantly go on guard as I hold the gym door open for her. Here it comes. Whatever she's been working up to is finally coming to light.

'Any nightmares lately?' She asks.

I tense even further. 'Nope.'

That’s a lie, and I can tell immediately that she knows it. Her lips flatten a little in disappointment that I don’t confide further, but what the hell does she expect? That she just has to wiggle her butt around and badger me into exercising and I’ll suddenly go all ‘Dear Diary’ on her?

She recovers quickly. ‘Okay. Next question. Why’d you say that thing about Ethan when your dad was here?’

I almost choke on my water. Talk about a subject change.

‘I’m an ass,’ I say, glancing briefly at her profile.

‘Finally, a true statement,’ she says as we get closer to the house.

She’s probably waiting for an apology, but I’m not really in the mood.

Olivia doesn’t ask anything more, but I’m still tense, certain that I’m missing something. Two unrelated questions delivered back to back, but with no push for a real answer? It’s all very un-female- very un- Olivia. What the hell is she up to this time?

Once inside the main house, she immediately starts up the stairs. Still lost in thought, I start to follow her up, my eyes still sort of checking out her ass, because, you know, yoga pants. That and more than two years of celibacy. My dad knew exactly what he was doing, sending a twentysomething in here for my ‘recovery.’

Olivia turns around abruptly, and I’m caught staring, but I don’t care.

She’s a step in front of me, so I’m looking up at her, and I lift my eyebrows in question, bracing.

Here it comes. Her trump cards.

‘Hey, I just realized something,’ she says.

I roll my eyes. Sure, you did. ‘Okay?’

Her eyes sparkle in triumph. ‘Your cane. You left it in the gym.’

Her casual observation has me taking a full step backward on the stairs.

She’s right… What… The… Hell.

I stand there long after she's skipped up the steps. I'm unable to move. Almost unable to breathe.

She's right. I walked the entire way, not only without my cane but without even realizing I didn't have my cane.

The thought should elate me, but I can't shake the dark sense of foreboding. No matter where I look, my walls are crumbling, and this damned girl keeps presenting me with the most dangerous element of all.

Hope…

Olivia…

On some level, I guess I must be bracing for his nightmares. My bedroom is on the same floor as Paul’s but not exactly next door, so I’m not sure I’d hear his shouts through two closed doors if I wasn’t listening to them.

But I am listening to them.

I’ve heard them the past couple of nights too, but things have been so weird between us that I knew my presence was the last thing that would be of comfort to him.

Tonight, however, instinct leads me in a different direction. It leads me straight to Paul.

My feet are on the floor the second I hear his first cry. Knowing that he sleeps almost naked, this time I grab my robe and pull it over my boxers and tank top, knotting the belt as I move down the hall.

I hesitate outside his door, torn between wanting to allow him privacy and give him comfort. God knows that the last time I went barging in there in

the middle of the night, it didn't exactly end well for my pride.

I hear a low moan.

Then 'Alex. Alex, no…'

Screw it.

He needs me.

The sheets are down around his waist, and there's just enough light to make out that he's shirtless.

Oh boy.

I take a deep breath and move toward the bed. One arm is flung up over his head, the other fisted at his

side as his fingers flex against the bedding.

Moving slowly, I reach for his hand, taking it in mine as I sit beside the bed. I feel a little silly. The whole thing is very Florence Nightingale, but the need to comfort is almost overwhelming.

He makes another moaning noise.

Do I wake him? I did that last time, and he flipped his sh*t. But let him stay in whatever hell his sleeping mind’s taken him seems cruel.

‘Paul.’

He twitches.

‘Paul.’ Louder this time.

He stills, but his body’s still rigid.

Gently I put a hand on his shoulder, trying to shut out the shock waves that go through me at the contact of skin on skin. It’s just a shoulder, Olivia.

‘Wake up,’ I say softly.

He’s stopped crying out, but his breathing is harsh and ragged.

‘Paul!’ I shake him now.

His eyes fly open, and he lies perfectly still.

I stay still too, letting him get his bearings. I wait for the tension to ease and his breathing to become more regular, but it’s almost as though the air becomes electric as he realizes my presence.

His eyes meet mine, and the mood goes from tense to intoxicating.

‘This better still be part of my dream,’ he says, his voice raspy.

I shake my head, afraid that if I talk, I'll break the moment. That he'll go ballistic like he did last time, drinking booze like it's going out of style and doling out bruising kisses like they're punishments.

If he kisses me tonight, I don't want it to be about pushing me away. I want it to be about bringing me closer.

I don't know who moves first. One second, I'm trying so hard not to look at his mouth, working up the courage to ask him about his dream, and the next second, I'm beneath him.

I should be shocked, but I’m not. I think I knew as soon as I left the safety of my bedroom that I would somehow end up here, on Paul Langdon’s rumpled bed with him braced above me.

With his weight on his left arm, he uses his right hand to trace a line from my temple down around my ear. His finger continues its slow downward movement, skimming across my collarbone. He pauses when he reaches the edge of my robe.

‘You shouldn’t have come,’ he whispers, his eyes following the slow-motion of his finger.

I swallow… ‘I heard from you. You sounded -’ Like you need me.

He shakes his head once, as though to tell both of us that he doesn’t need anyone, but we both know better.

I lie there, silent, wondering whether I dare to ask outright. Ever since that conversation with Lindy about how nobody had ever asked him point-blank about what happened overseas, I’ve known that the time will

come when I have to be the one to ask. He needs to talk about it; he's just never been given the chance. Not really.

But I have to move slowly. It's been buried inside him for so long that prying will only result in him pushing me away. Just like he has with his father and anyone else who's ever cared about him.

Maybe now isn't the time.

Because tonight - tonight he doesn't look like he wants to talk. And when he's staring at me with hot,

burning eyes, I don’t want to talk either.

Blue eyes ask the words that he won’t voice out loud. Do you want me?

My answer is also wordless.

But I make sure I’m very, very clear about what I want.

I slip my hand around the back of his neck, relishing the crispness of his ruthlessly short haircut against my palm.

I tug his face downward. He’s already in motion.

There’s no teasing this time as his lips quickly nudge mine open, his tongue sliding in to claim mine. I let out a tiny moan, wrapping both arms around his neck as he rolls more firmly on top of me, pressing me against the softness of the mattress.

Our mouths move frantically, restlessly, as we struggle to get closer. One or both of us kick the tangled sheet out of the way, and we both groan as his hips settle between my thighs.

My stomach drops even before I see the regretful twist of my father's mouth. This is like one of those wretched movie scenes that come to life. You know, the one where the d*ick-head guy says something cruel about the girl who's standing behind him? It's on the tip of my tongue to say that I don't need anyone to take care of me. But I want Olivia to tell him that. I want her to tell him that she's here with me because she wants to be, not because he's paying her. I want her to tell him the truth about breakfast, and last night.

I put on a quick swipe of mascara and pink lip gloss. I try to tell myself that it's out of habit (my mom believes that ladies should always be groomed,) but I'm pretty sure it's because I'm trying to make up for the fact that the last time Paul saw me, I had major boob sweat and a greasy ponytail and was short on oxygen.

My dark jeans and cream sweater aren't exactly sexy, but they're a big improvement from my running gear. As is the fact that I'm showered.

You’re an employee, my brain reminds me. So not the time to cultivate your inner tramp.

At the library door, I start to knock, only to realize that’ll give him a chance to throw himself out the window or sneak out some secret passageway that I’m only half kidding about. Instead, I go right in, and the scene in front of me is- um- a well, it’s ridiculously appealing.

The roaring fireplace in the corner, the sexy guy in the big wingback chair by the fireplace with a

book, and another of those amber-liquid-filled tumblers. It's all very après-ski chic.

For the first time since arriving in this hellish place, I feel a true pang of regret for intruding on him. He doesn't seem like a victim who needs a keeper so much as a guy trying to read a book in peace by the fire on a blustery afternoon.

I'm thinking about backing away and leaving him to the quiet when he opens his fat mouth.

‘That liquor you tossed earlier came from a five-hundred-dollar bottle.’

Ah… Back to normal… I use my foot to close the door behind me. ‘I’m sure that made a dent in the family coffers. You know, right, that all of the artwork in your halls is original?’

‘Come on,’ he says, still not looking up from his book ‘You’re a rich girl.

Surely you know how stereotypical comments like that can be.’

‘Yeah, you look torn up about it,’ I mutter, moving closer to him. ‘And how do you know I’m rich?’

‘Google. Your family’s a big deal.’

I ignore this. We’ll both be better off not talking about me.

‘So, what is it?’ I ask, tentatively sitting in the chair across from his even though I’m uninvited and unwelcome. I study him. Paul has just a bit more stubble than he did yesterday. Normally I prefer a clean-cut guy, but this slightly rough look suits his golden-

boy-meets-jaded-war-hero vibe. I wait for him to look at me, mentally bracing myself for the shock of it.

As though he's sensed my thoughts, his gray eyes flicked to mine, and I'm not sure why I thought bracing for it would make a damned bit of difference. It still sends ripples of want from my eyelashes right down to my toes.

'What is what?' He asks.

It takes me a moment to realize that I asked him a question. 'The precious liquor I threw out. What is it?'

His eyes flicker in irritation and I think he's going to tell me to get the hell out, but something seems to stop him, and he very slowly lifts the crystal glass from the table and hands it to me.

I sniff… 'Scotch…'

He nods. 'A thirty-year-old Highland Park. Not the best we have, but not something to be tossed down the drain, either.'

'Very alpha.'

He rolls his eyes, and I take a tiny sip, knowing from experience that I

don’t like Scotch. Turns out I don’t like the $500 one either, and I hand it back to him with a little shrug.

‘Want anything?’ He asks. ‘Wine?’

‘I’m good.’

Water would be great right about now. Between the hot look in his eyes and the heat of the fire, I’m a bit, um, parched.

‘What are you reading?’ I ask.

He groans. ‘Not this again. I know we’re stuck with each other, but

do we have to do the get-to-know-each-other chat? Can't we just sit in silence?'

The way he talks with each other gives me pause. I know why I'm sticking this out, but why is he? From what I've heard from Lindy and what I inferred from his father; Paul has no qualms about driving people away.

Is he treating me differently? Or just biding his time until he figures out how to add me to his list of banished caretakers?

I want it to be the first one.

‘Fine,’ I say, sitting back in the chair and settling in. ‘I’ll give you twenty minutes of silence in exchange for a shared dinner.’

‘Hell no,’ he says calmly, his attention already returned to his book as he turns a page.

‘Thirty minutes of silence.’

‘I don’t share meals with anyone.’

‘Come on,’ I cajole. ‘I promise not to try to feed you your soup airplane-style like a child.’

‘No.’

‘Paul.’

His eyes flick up again, and for the briefest of moments, the look on his face is almost one of longing. I realize it’s the first time I’ve spoken his name out loud.

I’m pretty sure I’m not just another caretaker. Thing is, I don’t know what I am.

‘I can keep a one-sided conversation going for a long time,’ I press on, quickly trying to move us

away from the charged moment. ‘Let’s see, I was born on August thirtieth, which means that my birthstone is peridot, which is a fancy word for ugly green. And speaking of color, this hair color? So not natural. I mean, I was one of those adorable blond toddlers, but it all went mouse-brown right about the time I started third grade, and I’ve been adjusting it ever since. I got my first period when I was… um- 10.’

~*~

What Karly said- ‘I first made cummie when I was 13. -About the time I fell in love with boys and also me…’

~*~

‘Okay!’ he interrupts. ‘I cave. You give me an hour and a half of silence now, and I’ll eat dinner with you later, but we can’t talk during that either.’

‘No deal. I’ll give you one hour of quiet time now, but we talk at dinner.’

He takes a small sip of Scotch and studies me. ‘You’re annoying.’

I start to argue that annoying has never been one of my personality traits. I’ve always been more in the polite, mellow, and shy category. I always say the right thing at parties, I respect other people’s boundaries, and I dodge controversial topics like they’re landmines. But there’s something about him that’s brought out this other version of myself. I kind of like it.

I shrug, refusing to apologize. Besides, the old, sweet Olivia would get stomped on by this guy.

‘So, do you know who Andrew Jackson is?’ I ask, pulling my legs beneath me and curling into the soft black leather of the chair.

‘Yes, I know who Andrew Jackson is. Old Hickory.’

Old what? ‘Whatever,’ I say. ‘Have you heard of this book? It’s called American Lion,’ and- ‘Olivia,’ says mildly, turning the page of his

book, ‘that hour of silence is effective immediately.’

I sigh… Guess I’ll have to read this book to talk about it. So disappointing.

‘Okay,’ I say as I open the foreword. ‘But you should know that I plan to eat very, very slowly at dinner.’

I ignore his groan as I settle in to read about this Old Hickory guy. And maybe sneak a few glances at the hottest guy I’ve ever seen.

It’s hot. So, freaking hot, but I’m not even aware of it. None of us are because it’s always hot, and not worth complaining about because there are bigger things to worry about, like the helicopter, that went down last week or the Humvee that didn’t return to the base last night.

The best you can do is ignore the heat, play football with your friends when you can, and pray to any god, spirit, or deity you can think of that you’ll be one of the lucky ones.

Then Williams breaks the code.

We’re out on standard patrol, and he breaks the damn code.

‘I freaking hate it here.’

I’m in the process of mentally thinking about what the hell I’m supposed to write to Ashley, my girlfriend back home, but my brain skids to a halt at Williams’s outburst. Garcia and Miller stop bastardizing whatever outdated Jay-Z song they were attempting to sing and stare at Williams with a mixture of dismay and disgust.

Alex Skinner, my best friend since boot camp, just looks pissed. ‘Goddamn it, Williams.’

Greg Williams merely shrugs. Of all of us, he’s the smallest, but he’s damned fast. And smart. At least I thought so until he broke the freaking code.

‘Don’t start that,’ I say, trying to lighten the mood. ‘You know the second we start acknowledging that we are, living the sh*t life, that’s the second our luck runs out.’

‘I’m just saying. This freaking-blows. The sand, the heat, the constant fear of being sent home in a box. You all know it.’

Skinner leans forward to get in Williams’s face. ‘We all knew that getting into it. This isn’t some glorified World War I bullsh*t where we didn’t know what to expect.’

Williams shoves at Skinner’s shoulder, and I place an arm between them before the two hotheads make a sh*tty situation sh*ttier.

‘I’m allowed to say what I think,’ Williams grumbles, shaking both of us off and staring down at his hands. ‘I’m allowed to say what we’re all thinking. There ain’t no freaking curse that’s going to come because I spoke the truth.’

Less than ten minutes later, we find out he’s wrong.

Williams gets sent home in a box.

So, do the rest of them.

Suddenly time both speeds up and slows down, and a second later I'm on the ground holding on to Alex, and he's trying to talk but the only thing that comes out of his mouth is blood.

There's too much blood. Mine. His. It's all one bitter, metallic mess.

I try to understand what Alex is telling me. I try to understand his dying wish, try to comprehend his last word, but there's too much blood.

There's always too much damned blood.

It’s not the first time I’ve woken up in a pool of sweat.

But it’s the first time since those early days in the hospital that someone’s been there when I wake up.

I don’t remember the nurses well, but I’m pretty sure none of them looked like Olivia Middleton, kneeling on my bed, wearing only a tiny white T-shirt and pink boxer shorts. What is it with her and pink?

And then I comprehend that she’s here. In my bedroom.

I comprehend why she’s here.

Part: 2

The dream.

I was yelling, and she came to find out why.

‘Get the freakout,’ I say, pushing myself into a sitting position and rolling out of bed on the other side before she can touch me. ‘Get the freak-out!’

‘You were screaming,’ she says calmly as she climbs off the bed and turns to face me, the king-size bed

separating her from my sweaty, amped-up self.

‘Of course, I’m yelling. It’s a goddamned war.

My chin dips down and rests on my chest in defeat. I can’t turn around. I can’t make myself look at her face. But the little hurt noise she makes tears at me anyway.

But that doesn’t mean I have to like the way he keeps laughing at every other thing she says, or the way they’re both dropping names of mutual friends I’ve never heard of. Five minutes ago, I

thought Kali was just about the cutest, nicest thing on the planet- definite Maine BFF material. Now I hate that she's the cutest, nicest thing on the planet. I also hate the way Paul is smiling so easily around her.

He never smiles like that around me.

She studies me for a moment, and I'm pretty sure she wants to call my bluff.

Instead, the door closes behind her, and I stand for several moments staring at bobbing sailboats, wishing I

could be on one of them sailing to anywhere that's not here.

It's a testament to just how cushy my life has been up until the past couple of months that I've truly never given much thought to being unhappy. I mean, I never really thought about being happy either. I guess you could say I've floated but in a harmless, life-is-good kind of way.

And now?

Now I can't bear the thought of returning to my life with all of its glossy easiness, and yet staying in Maine is

almost as unfathomable. Not just because it’s foreign, and not just because Paul is a complete ass-plug who may or may not turn me on. But because I don’t know what I’m supposed to do.

Tomorrow morning is right around the corner, and I’ll be expected to do the job that they’re paying me for: being a companion to a guy who can’t take care of himself. Except, beyond that limp and the sneer, he seems to be managing just fine.

I can’t imagine he’ll want me to read the classics aloud to him while he dabbles in watercolors. I’ll be lucky if he even lets me in the same room.

The futility of it all threatens to choke me, and I go through the motions of unpacking the suitcase that Mick carried upstairs for me. With each bra I drop into the dresser, I keep hoping it’ll help my brain accept that I’m staying.

Instead, my mind is going down a ridiculous path - wondering which bra Paul would most like to see. Wondering what it would feel like to have him take

it off me. Wondering - Oh, my God, Middleton. You are half a dirty thought away from being a revolting perv.

By the time I brush my teeth and wash my face in the small but modern bathroom, I'm surprised to realize that I'm exhausted even though the sun's barely set. I wonder if I'm supposed to check on 'Mr. Paul,' but from the way he glared at me as I stormed out of his cave earlier, I don't think another encounter today will do either of us any good.

Changing into my pajamas, I curl up on my side on the large bed, resting my cheek on my hands as I stare out at the dark sky. When I finally drift off to sleep, it's not picturesque water and boats I see. It's an angry mouth and gorgeous blue eyes.

For the first time in months, my dreams aren't about Ethan. Or Michael.

Tonight, my dreams are about someone far more dangerous to me than either of the guys from my past.

Back when I was in high school, football and I were kinds of a

big deal. And I always liked it well enough, but football was never really my true passion, cheesy as that sounds.

I was semi-disappointed when my coach marked me for QB early in my freshman year. The quarterback doesn't get to run much.

That's my passion. Running. Tossing a football to a bunch of other guys is nothing compared to the rush I got from running.

I ran every day leading up to Afghanistan. I ran as often as I could around the base after I got there. And

since getting back - Well, let's just say that my future holds as much hope for running as it does flying.

But I have a secret.

Not a big one. It's pathetic. But one that nobody knows. Well, I suspect Mick and Lindy might, but they won't dare mention it.

The truth is, running is the one area of my life where I let the tiniest ray of hope shine in. Not hope. Because I can't let myself think that it's going to happen. But I dream of running again.

It’s that dream that has me getting up at the ass crack of dawn every morning. Before Lindy or Mick or whatever godforsaken caretaker is lurking about is awake - hell, before the sun’s even up.

I go outside and pretend I’m running. Not physically pretending, of course. My leg’s not even remotely able to sustain that kind of fantasy. But mentally? I run.

It’s the only time I’ll use my cane. Partially because nobody’s watching, but also because the cane

allows me to go longer, farther, faster. Just a mile or so on a trail that winds around the bay. I walk/hobble in the predawn silence and let myself pretend just for an hour that I'm running. That I'm normal. It's my time. Of course, being the hermit that I am, all time is my time. But this is different.

I'd almost say- sacred if that didn't sound so ridiculous. But save for the fishermen, because this is Maine, after all, I'm alone. And this solitude is different from the rest of my day because it's intentional.

This time of the day is the only time I feel alive.

And I never dreamed that it could be ripped away from me in the most debilitating way possible.

Olivia- the very person who kept me up the entire night- is a runner. Worse, she's running on my path during my time.

She's running toward me, and although she's still a good way off, I know it's her. That blond ponytail and that tall, slim frame are all I've been able to think about since that kiss.

Turning around would be futile. Her jog would easily overtake my walk, so there's nothing to do but wait. And brace…

I slow to a standstill. It's bad enough that she has to see me with the cane; I'll be damned before I give her the spectacle of watching me hobble along with it.

Part: 3

She's got hot pink running shoes, which are ridiculous, especially since they perfectly match the long-

sleeved pink running shirt. The hairband is also pink.

Come to think of it, wasn't she wearing a pink sweater yesterday? Just what I need. A bubblegum explosion in my life.

Even if her fashion-forward running gear didn't clue me in (real runners don't care about matching their hairband to their shoes,) it's obvious from her slow pace, her pink cheeks, and the gait that's just slightly off that she's new at this.

Already my brain is racing with pointers. Breathe in through your nose, out through your mouth. Don’t move your arms so much. You overpronate, do your girly shoes compensate for that?

At first, I thought she wouldn't see me. There’s no change in her gait or expression as she closes the gap between us. But then she’s almost upon me. Then in front of me. She stops.

My fingers clench on the handle of my cane- a black python affair I ordered on the Internet mostly

because it was so ridiculously gaudy- and I resist the urge to turn my head and give her my profile. My good side.

But if the two are going to be stuck together for three months, she'd better get used to seeing me. I'd better get used to her seeing me.

She doesn't look at the cane at all, and other than the briefest flick of her green eyes over my scars, she doesn't seem to care about those either. Then again, it's still dark, with the barest hint of the early morning sun

illuminating us, so perhaps she can't see their ugliness. Which reminds me-

'You shouldn't go running alone in the dark,' I growl.

She frowns almost imperceptibly, just the finest line between her dark blond eyebrows. 'Why not?'

'You go running through the streets of New York City at the crack of dawn?'

'How do you know I'm from New York City?'

I remain silent, not wanting to have to explain that I spent most of the night studying the limited information my dad had sent over on Olivia. Nothing interesting. NYU drop-out. Manhattan resident. Short of a crash course in CPR, no experience in taking care of anyone. She turned twenty-two just days before arriving in Maine.

'What the hell is she wearing?' Sarah asks cattily.

It's no secret that my friends fall into the snob category, Bella excepted most of the time. Sarah's the

worst of the lot, and not for the first time in my life I wonder why I continue to let her pretend we're friends.

Knowing that they'll continue to hover around me like a pack of glamorous guard dogs until I've dealt with the newcomers, I sneak a tiny peek over my shoulder at where Ethan and Stephanie stand to talk to a mutual family friend.

My heart twists the tiniest bit at the sight of Ethan. In his gray slacks, perfectly tailored white shirt, and Burberry tie, he looks as well-groomed

and gorgeous as ever. He has the dark blond hair and broad shoulders better suited to Hollywood than the Manhattan business world, but luckily, he’s got the brains and the charm to keep his head above water amid the Manhattan sharks.

Then- I look at her.

From the sneer on my friends’ faces, I was expecting Stephanie to be wearing torn jeans, a leopard-print catsuit, or something else ridiculous, but the truth is she looks kind of cute. Her dark eye makeup is the perfect

complement to her wide blue eyes, and the strapless gray dress would be downright demure if not for the bright orange belt around her tiny waist. She's paired the whole thing with these beat-up-looking riding boots, which, while not exactly an Upper East Side standard, gives the whole effect of a girl comfortable with herself.

Of course, she's comfortable. She's perched on the arm of the boy you thought you were going to marry.

I push the b*tchy thought away. I've had months to accept that

Ethan isn't coming back. Hell, I was even the one who insisted that he and his new girlfriend be invited to the party. Ethan's parents and mine have been best friends since long before we were even in the womb. I'm not about to let a little thing like betrayal throw a wrench in that.

'You okay, Liv?' Bella asks softly.

I tear my eyes away from Ethan and Stephanie. 'Yeah. Give me a minute, though, 'kay?' I hand her my champagne glass. 'And don't let them

attack Stephanie,’ I murmur to my best friend.

But escaping is no easy task. I’m stopped at least five times by well-wishers who want to tell me that they always knew I had such a good heart.

Ha.

Finally- I’m able to pour myself a glass of my raspberry iced tea to stave off an impending headache and head toward the stairs to escape to my bedroom, just for a couple of minutes.

My mother grabs my arm. ‘Where are you going?’

I point down at my six-hundred-dollar Jimmy Choo pumps. ‘Blister. I just want to grab a Band-Aid.’

Mom’s green eyes- the ones everyone is always saying are identical to my own- narrow slightly, but her grip eases on my arm. ‘Everyone is so proud of you,’ she says, looking both relieved and delighted. ‘Holly Scherwitz said she wouldn’t be surprised to see you win a Nobel Peace Prize someday.’

Inside, I’m cracking up in bitter amusement, but years of training in social appropriateness have me merely lifting my eyebrows. ‘I hope you told her that was absurd.’

Mom’s smile slips. ‘It’s not absurd. It’s admirable, what you’re doing.

Moving to the middle of nowhere to help out one of our injured veterans?’

‘Except it’s not the middle of nowhere, is it? It’s a one-hour plane

ride, thanks to your and Dad's interference.'

Mom doesn't bother to look guilty. 'Olivia, honey. You wouldn't have lasted a day in El Salvador or wherever it was you were going to go build houses.

There are plenty of people right here at home that needs help. And we're so proud of you for doing this.'

I give her a look. 'Uh-huh. Is that why you guys didn't speak to me for a week when I first told you about it?'

‘We were in shock,’ Mom says, unruffled. ‘Your father and I had no idea you weren't happy in business school, and of course, we’d always envisioned you taking over the company-’

It’s times like these that I wish my parents were old money instead of second-generation money. Each of my friends is richer than the next, but most of their families’ wealth goes back to some 1800s railroad or some industry whose income is pretty much self-generating by now. Not in my case.

My grandfather had the whole American-dream syndrome going on and changed his midwestern middle-class destiny, building a highly respected advertising firm instead. Dad's only built on his father's success, and it's fully expected to remain a family affair.

And I'm an only child. No pressure.

'I might still take over the company, Mom. I just need to get away from all this, you know? The only time I leave Manhattan is to go to the

Hamptons in the summer or Saint-Tropez in January. I mean, you've always said you don't want me to be one of those girls.'

Mom shakes her head to interrupt me. 'I know. Believe me, as much as I play the New York society game, I do want you to know that there's a big world out there, Olivia. But are you sure you don't want to stay a little closer to home? There's a facility out in Queens, and…'

'I'm already committed, Mom,' I say gently. 'Mr. Langdon's already

sent a check to cover my travel expenses and I'm expected next Friday.'

Mom sighs. 'Can't a grown man arrange for his care? Something's weird about his father having to do all the planning.'

'You're the one who connected me with the Langdon's in the first place. They're legit. Plus, Paul's invalid. If he could arrange for his care, he probably wouldn't need care.' I say this as patiently as possible. It's a clear

indication of just how small my mom's world is, despite her good intentions.

She doesn't know anyone who's gone to war, much less been injured.

Not that I do, for that matter. Park Avenue isn't exactly swarming with members of the U.S. armed forces.

'Well,' Mom says, taking a deep breath and pushing my long hair over my shoulder affectionately, 'it's lucky he has a pretty girl like you to take care of him.'

I smile wanly. I’ve been hearing this refrain all evening, and it makes me slightly ill. Not only because it’s condescending to the poor guy I’ll be caring for, but because it makes me into some sort of sweet, saintly figure.

Only two other people in this house know the truth about me. My mother isn’t one of them.

‘Hurry back down,’ Mom says. ‘The Austen's said they hadn’t had a chance to talk to you yet.’

Part: 4

Probably because I’ve been dodging them. Annamarie Austen is the catty kind of gossip I’ve avoided like the plague in recent months, and Jeff Austen stares too long at my boobs.

‘I’ll be fast,’ I say before fleeing up the winding staircase to fetch my imaginary Band-Aid. My feet are far too used to being pinched in high heels to be plagued by blisters. I just won't- need- five minutes to myself. A chance to be away from everyone’s misplaced

fawning and the crushing pressure in my chest every time I look at Ethan.

But my bedroom isn't quite the solitary sanctuary I imagined. Far from it.

I jump in surprise, but a part of me isn't surprised at all to see him in here.

Him being the iceberg that destroyed my life. It's only appropriate that he also be around to watch me sink.

Now three people in the house know the truth about me.

‘Michael,’ I say, keeping my voice calm. Polite. I’m always polite.

‘Liv.’

Michael St. Claire is one of those amiable, good-looking guys who attract friends- and girls- like a magnet. He gets his dark brown hair perfectly styled at a salon that costs just about as much as my own, and his light golden skin is the gift of great Italian genes on his mother’s side. He’s been one of my

best friends for as long as I can remember.

When he was seven, they'd spent a summer exploring their neighborhood in Dawson, Minnesota, looking for treasure and wound up with a garden shed full of weird sh*t: an old top hat, a busted radio, two tire spokes, and the rusted frame of a bicycle. They'd found adventure in whatever sh*tty-ass town their mom had happened to dump them. Now they would never have another adventure. She would never climb, or bike, or bet

him five bucks she could still beat him in a footrace. She would always need help to bathe, to get on and off the toilet.

And it was all Luke Hanrahan's fault. He'd messed with Dayna's car, freaked with the steering in advance of the showdown, forcing her off the road.

Marcel knew it.

'Mom went on a date last night,' Dayna said, obviously trying to change the subject.

‘So…?’ Marcel said. He was still vaguely annoyed. Besides, everywhere they went, his mom found some new loser to date.

Dayna shrugged. ‘She seemed into it. And she wouldn’t tell me who.’

‘She was probably embarrassed,’ Marcel said. In the silence, he heard banging from outside- someone was going through the Dumpsters. Dayna leaned forward to look out the window.

‘Sh*t,’ she said.

‘Little Kelly?’ he said, and Dayna nodded. Little Bill Kelly had to be thirty and at least six foot five, but his dad, Bill Kelly, had been police chief for twenty years before his retirement, and everyone knew him as Big Kelly. Marcel had only ever seen Big Kelly once, and even then, only for a second, when he’d accidentally biked out in front of Bill’s car. Bill had leaned on the horn and shouted for Marcel to be careful.

Marcel sighed, eased Dayna’s legs off his lap, and stood up. Through

the window, he could see Little Kelly balancing on the steel drum full of old grease, methodically sorting through one of the Dumpsters sandwiched up against the back of Dot's Diner, just next to the kitchen door. It was the third time in a month he'd been picking garbage.

Marcel didn't bother putting on a shirt. He crossed the short concrete alley that divided their apartment from the diner, careful to avoid the broken glass. The kitchen boys drank beers during their shift sometimes.

‘Hey, man,’ Marcel said, deliberately loud, deliberately cheerful. Little Kelly straightened up like he’d been electrocuted. He climbed down unsteadily from the steel drum.

‘I’m not doing anything,’ he said, avoiding Marcel’s gaze. Other than the stubble on his chin, Little Kelly had the face of an overgrown baby. He had once been a star athlete, a good student, too, but had gotten screwed in the head over in Afghanistan… Or Iraq… like- one of those. Now he rode the buses all day and forgot to come

home. Once Marcel had passed Little Kelly sitting cross-legged at the corner of the road, crying loudly.

‘You are looking for something?’ Marcel noticed that Little Kelly had made a small trash pile at the foot of the Dumpster, of tin foil wrappers, metal coils, bottle caps, and a broken plate. Little Kelly looked at him for a minute, jaw working like he was trying to chew through the leather. Then, abruptly, he pushed past Marcel and disappeared around the corner. Marcel squatted and started to gather

up all the crap Little Kelly had removed from the Dumpster. It was already hot, and the alley smelled.

Just then he sensed movement behind him. Thinking Little Kelly had returned, he straightened and spun around, saying, ‘You really shouldn’t be back here-’ The words dried up in his throat. Natalie Velez was standing behind him, leaning her weight onto her good foot, looking clean and showered and pretty and like she belonged anywhere else but here.

‘Hi,’ she said, smiling. His first, instinctive response was to walk past her, go into the house, slam the door, and suffocate himself. But of course, he couldn’t. Holy sh*t… Nat Velez was standing in front of him, and he was shirtless. And hadn’t brushed his teeth. Or showered. And he was holding tinfoil from the trash.

‘I was just cleaning up…’ He trailed off helplessly.

Nat’s eyes ticked down to his bare chest, then up to his hair, which

was in all probability sticking straight up.

‘Oh my God.’ Her face began to turn pink. ‘I should have called. I’m so sorry. Did you just get up or something?’

‘No. No, not at all. I was just -’ Marcel tried not to talk too forcefully, or breathe too hard, in case his breath was rank. ‘Look, can you give me a minute? Just wait here?’

‘Of course.’ Nat was even cuter when she blushed. She looked like a

cookie that had been iced for Christmas.

‘One minute,’ Marcel repeated. Inside, Marcel sucked in a deep breath. Holy sh*t. Nat Velez. He didn’t even have time to worry about the fact that she was seeing his house, his crappy little apartment, and had probably had to walk past the grease traps being emptied, had gone in her little sandals past the sodden bits of spinach that got trekked out of the diner by the cooks, past the Dumpsters and their smell. In the bathroom, he brushed his teeth and

gargled with mouthwash. He smelled his underarms-not bad-and put on deodorant just in case.

He ran water through his hair and pulled on a clean white T-shirt, one that showed just a bit of the tattoo that covered most of his chest and wrapped around his right shoulder and forearm. His hair was already sticking up again. He rammed on a baseball hat.

Part: 5

Good… decent, at least. He sprayed on a bit of this man’s body-spray thing his mom had gotten for free

at Walmart, feeling like a douche, but thinking it was better to feel like a douche than to smell like an asshole.

Outside, Nat was doing a good job of pretending not to notice that Marcel lived in a falling-down apartment behind a diner.

'Hey.' She smiled again, big and bright, and he felt his insides do a weird turnover. He hoped Dayna wasn't watching out the window. 'Sorry about, like, barging upon you.' 'That's okay.'

'I was going to call,' she said. 'I texted Maggie for your number. Sorry.

But then I thought it might be better to talk in person.' 'It's totally fine.' Marcel's voice came out more harshly than he'd intended. Sh*t. He was screwing this up already. He coughed and crossed his arms, trying to look casual. It was because his hands suddenly felt like meat hooks at the end of his arms, and he had forgotten what to do with them.

'How's your ankle?' An Ace bandage was wrapped thickly around her ankle and foot, which made a funny contrast to her bare legs.

‘Sprained.’ Nat made a face. ‘I’ll live, but-’ For a brief second, her face spasmed, like she was in pain.

‘Look, Marcel, is there someplace we can go? Like, to talk?’

There was no way he was taking her inside. Not an icicle’s chance in hell. He didn’t want Nat gaping at Dayna or, worse, trying too hard to be nice.

‘How did you get here?’ he asked, thinking she might have a car.

Again, she blushed. ‘I had my dad drop me,’ she said.

He didn’t ask how she’d figured out where he lived. Like all things in Carp, it was usually just a question of asking around. The problem was where to take her.

He couldn’t go into the diner. His mom was working. That left Meth Row. Nat walked slowly, still limping, although she seemed to be in less pain than she had been last night. But she took the first opportunity to sit down: on the rusted fender of an abandoned,

wheel-less- Buick. All its windows were shattered, and the seats were speckled with bird sh*t, the leather torn up by tiny animals.

‘I wanted to thank you again,’ Nat said. ‘You were so - You were great.

For helping me last night.’ Marcel felt vaguely disappointed, as he often felt when interacting with other people when the reality failed to meet his expectations. Or in this case, his fantasies. Some part of him had been hoping she’d come over to confess that

she’d fallen madly in love with him. Or maybe she’d skip the words altogether, and strain onto her tiptoes and open her mouth and let him kiss her. Except she probably couldn’t stand on her toes with her ankle the way it was, which is one of the 2,037 ways his fantasy was unrealistic. He said, ‘It’s not a problem.’

She twisted her mouth like she’d swallowed something sour. For a second, she didn’t say anything. Then she blurted, ‘Did you hear Cory Walsh and Felix Harte was arrested?’ He

shook his head, and she clarified, ‘Drunk and disorderly conduct. And trespassing.’ She shifted her weight. ‘You think Panic is over?’ ‘No way,’ he said. ‘The cops are too stupid to stop it, anyway.’ She nodded but didn’t look convinced. ‘So, what do you think will happen next?’

‘No idea,’ he said. He knew that Nat was asking him for a hint. He swallowed back a bad taste in his mouth. She knew he liked her, and she was trying to use him.

‘I think we can use each other,’ she said abruptly, and it was this fact- the fact of her acknowledgment, her honesty -that made him want to keep listening.

‘Use each other how?’ he asked. She picked at the hem of her skirt. It looked like it was made of terry cloth, which made him think of towels, which made him think of Nat in a towel. The sun was so bright, he was dizzy.

‘We make a deal,’ she said, looking up at him. Her eyes were dark, eager, and sweet, like the eyes of a

puppy. ‘If either of us wins, we split the cash fifty-fifty.’

Marcel was so startled; he couldn’t say anything for a minute.

‘Why?’

Why- he asked finally. ‘Why me? You don’t even -I mean; we hardly even know each other.’ What about Maggie? he almost said.

‘It’s just a feeling I have,’ she said, and once again he found her honesty appealing. ‘You’re good at this game.

You know things.’ It seemed somehow surprising that Nat Velez, with her thick, perfect hair and slicked lip-gloss lips, would speak so frankly about a subject most people avoided. It was like hearing a supermodel fart: surprising and kind of thrilling. She plowed on: ‘We can help each other. Share information. Team up against the others. We have more of a chance of getting to Joust that way. And then-’ She gestured with her hands.

‘Then we’ll have to face off…’

Part: 6

Marcel said.

‘But if one wins, we both win,’ Nat said, smiling up at him. He had no intention of letting anyone else win. Then again, he didn’t care about the money, either. He had a different goal in mind. Maybe she knew that or sensed it somehow.

So, he said, ‘Yeah, okay. Partners.’

‘Allies,’ Nat said, and stuck out her hand, formally. It felt soft, and also slightly sweaty.

She stood up, laughing. ‘It’s settled, then.’ She couldn’t crane onto her tiptoes to kiss him, so she just grabbed his shoulders and planted a kiss on the side of his neck. She giggled.

‘Now I have to do the other side, so you’re even.’

And he knew then that he was going to fall head over heels for her this summer.

Afterward, no one knew who had posted the video online; it appeared on so many pages

simultaneously, and spread to everybody else so quickly, it was impossible to determine its point of origin, although many people suspected it was Joey Addison or Jack Wong, just because they were both d*icks and two years ago had secretly filmed, and posted, videos of the girls' locker rooms.

It wasn't even that interesting- just a couple of jerky shots of Ray and Zev swinging at each other, shoulders butting up into the frame as a crowd formed; and then flashing lights, people

screaming, a moment when the feed went dead. Then more images: sweeping lights and cops' distorted voices, tiny and harmless-sounding in the recording, and one close-up of Nat, mouth wide, with one arm around Maggie and the other around Marcel.

Then darkness… Marcel still kept a copy on his hard drive, so he could freeze-frame on that final moment when Nat looked so scared and he was helping support her. Just a few hours later an email made the rounds as well.

Subject line: blank. From: judgmentfallingtooyou@gmail.com

The message was simple, with only 3 or 4 lines.

Loose lips sink ships.

Nobody tells. Or else.

TUESDAY, JUNE

Date of the 28th

Maggie-

‘YOU’RE SURE THIS IS LEGIT, RIGHT?’ JOH JOH WAS SITTING forward in the driver’s seat, both hands on the wheel, maneuvering the car over

a pitted one-lane dirt track. His hair looked even more exuberant than usual, as though he'd tried to style it with a vacuum cleaner. He was wearing his dad's old Virginia Tech sweatshirt, loose flannel pajama bottoms, and flip-flops. When he came to Maggie he had announced, with a certain pride, that he had not yet showered. 'You're not going to get axed to death by some psychopath, right?'

'Shut up, Joh Joh.' Maggie reached out to shove him, and he jerked the wheel, nearly sending them

into one of the ditches that ran along both sides of the road.

'That's no way to treat your driver,' he said, pretending to be offended.

'Fine. Shut up, driver.' There was an anxious feeling in Maggie's stomach. The trees here were so thick, they almost completely blocked out the sun.

'Just looking out for you, malady,' Joh Joh said, smiling, showing off the overlap in his teeth. 'I don't want my best girl to be turned into a

lampshade.' 'I thought Avery was your best girl,' Maggie said. She'd meant it as a joke, but the words came out sounding bitter. Like a bitter, heartbroken, lonely spinster. Which she kind of was. Maybe not a spinster-you couldn't be a spinster at eighteen, she didn't think. But close…'

Come on, Maggie,' Joh Joh said. He looked hurt. 'You've always been my best girl.' Maggie kept her face to the window. They would arrive any second. But she felt a little better now.

Joh Joh had that effect on her-like a human anti-anxiety pill. The day after the challenge at the water towers, Maggie had overslept, waking only when an anonymous text pinged on her phone: Quit now, before you get hurt. She was so shaken, she'd spent fifteen minutes searching for her car keys before remembering she'd stashed them on the hook by the door, then got fired from Walmart when she showed up twenty minutes late for her shift.

And suddenly she had found herself blubbering in the parking lot. A

week and a half earlier, she'd had a boyfriend and a job-not a good job, but still a job. A little money in her pocket. Now she had nothing. No boyfriend, no job, no money. And someone wanted to make sure she didn't play Fright.

Then, out of nowhere, she'd been attacked by a dog with the biggest tongue she'd ever seen. Maybe attacked was the wrong word, since the dog was just licking her-but still, she'd never been much of an animal person, and it had seemed like an attack. And some crazy old lady carrying a sh*t ton

of grocery bags had offered her a job on the spot, even though Maggie had snot dripped from her nose and was wearing a tank top streaked with salad dressing, which she hadn't noticed in her rush to get out of the house.

The woman's name was Anne.

'Muppets took a shine to you,' she'd said. Muppet was the name of the dog with the long tongue. 'He doesn't usually get on with strangers. You seem like you're a natural with animals.' Maggie had stayed quiet. She didn't want to admit that for the most part,

she thought animals, like pimples, were best to ignore. If you fuss too much with them, it would backfire. The only time she'd tried to keep a pet, an anemic-looking goldfish she'd called Star, it had been dead within thirty-two hours. But she said yes when Anne asked if she'd be into doing some pet sitting and light chores. It was $150 a week, cash in the hand, which was roughly the same as she would have made working part-time for Walmart.

Suddenly the trees opened up and they arrived. Maggie immediately

felt relieved. She didn’t know what she’d been expecting-maybe, after what Joh Joh said, a dingy barn full of rusting farm tools and machetes-but instead she saw a sprawling red farmhouse and a large circular parking area, neatly trimmed of grass. She could see a barn, too, but it wasn’t dingy-and next to it, a series of whitewashed sheds.

As soon as she opened the door, several roosters came trotting toward her, and a dog more than one dog? …Began furiously barking. Anne emerged from the house and waved.

‘Holy sh*t,’ Joh Joh said. He looked impressed. ‘It’s a zoo.’ ‘See? Not a human lampshade insight.’ Maggie slid out of the car, then ducked so she could say goodbye.

‘Thanks, Joh Joh.’ He saluted. ‘Text when you need a pickup, ma’am.’ Maggie closed the door. Anne crossed the yard toward her.

‘Is that your boyfriend?’ Anne said, shielding her eyes with one hand, as Joh Joh began to turn around.

This was so unexpected, Maggie’s face got hot. ‘No, no,’ she

said quickly, angling her body away from the car, as though Joh Joh, in case he was still watching, would be able to read the conversation in her body language.

'He's cute,' Anne said matter-of-factly. She waved, and Joh Joh tapped the horn before pulling away. The blush grew into an all-over body inferno. Maggie crossed her arms and then dropped them again. Fortunately, Anne didn't seem to notice.

'I'm glad you came.' Anne smiled, as though Maggie had just

dropped by for a social visit. ‘Let me show you around.’

Maggie was glad that Anne seemed to approve of her choice of outfit: clean jeans, sneakers, and a soft, nubby henley shirt, which had belonged to Joh- John before he accidentally shrunk it. She hadn’t wanted to look sloppy, but then again, Anne had told her to wear clothes she could muck up, and she hadn’t wanted to look like she hadn’t listened.

They started toward the house. The roosters were still running around

like crazy, and Maggie noticed a chicken pen on the other side of the yard, in which a dozen yellow-feathered chicks were strutting and pecking and preening in the sun. The dogs kept up their racket. There were three of them, including Muppet, pacing around a small enclosure, barking lustily.

'You have a lot of animals,' Maggie pointed out, and then immediately felt like an idiot. She tucked her hands into her sleeves.

But Anne laughed. 'It's awful, isn't it? I just can't stop.' 'So-o, is this,

like, a farm?' Maggie didn't see any farming equipment, but she didn't know anyone who kept chickens for fun.

Again, Anne laughed. 'Hardly. I give the eggs away to the pantry sometimes. But I don't pull up a damn thing besides bird poop, dog poop, poop of all kinds.' She held the door to the house open for Maggie. Maggie thought that she would probably spend the whole summer shoveling sh*t. 'My husband, Larry, loved animals,' Anne continued as she followed Maggie into

the house. They entered the prettiest kitchen Maggie had ever seen.

Even Nat's kitchen didn't compare. The walls were cream and yellow; the cupboards tawny wood, bleached nearly white from the sun, which poured through two large windows. The counters were spotless. No ants here. Against one wall were shelves arranged with blue-and-white pottery and small porcelain figurines: miniature horses, cats, donkeys, and pigs. Maggie was almost afraid to move, as one step in the wrong

direction might cause everything to shatter.

‘Tea?’ Anne asked. Maggie shook her head. She didn’t know anyone who drank tea in real life-only British people in TV miniseries. Anne filled a kettle and plunked it on the stove. ‘We moved here from Chicago.’

‘Really?’ Maggie burst out. The farthest she had ever been from Carp was Albany. Once on a school trip, and once when her mom had a court date because she’d been driving with a

suspended license. ‘What’s Chicago like?’

‘Cold,’ Anne said. ‘Freeze your balls off ten months out of the year. But the other two are pure joy.’ Maggie didn’t respond. Anne didn’t seem like the type who would say balls, and Maggie liked her a little better for it.

‘Larry and I worked in ad sales. We swore we’d make a change someday.’ Anne shrugged. ‘Then he died, and I did.’

Once again, Maggie didn’t say anything. She wanted to ask how Larry

had died, and when, but didn’t know if it was appropriate. She didn’t want Anne to think she was obsessed with death or something. When the water had boiled, Anne filled her mug and then directed Maggie back through the door they had come. It was funny, walking across the yard with Anne, while the steam rose from her tea and mingled with the soft mist of morning. Maggie felt like she was in a movie about a farm somewhere far away. They rounded the corner of the house, and the dogs began to bark again.

‘Shut it!’ Anne said, but good-naturedly.

They didn’t listen. She kept up a nonstop stream of conversation as they walked. ‘This one’s the feed shed’- this, as she unlocked one of the small, whitewashed sheds, pushing it open with one hand- I try to keep everything organized so I don’t end up throwing grain to the dogs and trying to force kibble on a chick. Remember to turn off the lights before you lock up. I don’t even want to tell you what my electricity bills are like.’

‘This is where the shovels and rakes go’-they were at another shed - ‘buckets, horseshoes, any kind of crap you find lying around that doesn’t seem to fit anywhere else. Got it? Am I going too fast?’

Maggie shook her head, and then, realizing Anne wasn’t looking at her, said, ‘No.’

She realized she wasn’t nervous anymore. She liked the feel of the sun on her shoulders and the smell of dark, wet ground everywhere. Probably some of what she was

smelling was animal sh*t, but it didn’t smell that bad-just like growth and newness. Anne showed her the stables, where two horses stood quietly in the half-dark, like sentinels guarding something precious.

Maggie had never been so close to a horse before, and she laughed out loud when Anne gave her a carrot and instructed her to feed it to the black one, Lady Belle, and Maggie felt its soft, leathery muzzle and the gentle pressure of its teeth.

‘They were racehorses. Both were injured. Saved ’em from being shot,’ Anne said as they left the stables.

‘Shot?’ Maggie repeated. Anne nodded. For the first time, she looked angry. ‘That’s what happens when they’re no good for running anymore. The owner takes a shotgun to their head.’ Anne had saved all the animals from one gruesome fate or another: the dogs and horses from death, the chickens, and roosters from various diseases when no one else had cared enough to spend the money to nurse

them. There were turkeys she had saved from slaughter, cats she had rescued from the street in Hudson, and even an enormous potbellied pig named Tinkerbell, which had once been an unwanted runt. Maggie couldn't imagine that it had ever been the brunt of anything.

'All she wanted was a little love,'

Anne said as they passed the pen where Tinkerbell was lolling in the mud. 'That, and about a pound of feed a day.' She laughed.

Finally, they came to a tall, fenced-in enclosure. The sun had finally broken free of the trees and refracted through the rising mist; it was practically blinding. The fence encircled an area of at least a few acres-mostly open lands, patches of dirt, and high grass, but some trees, too. Maggie couldn’t see any animals.

For the first time all morning, Anne grew quiet. She sipped her tea, squinting in the sun, staring off through the chain-link fence. After a few

minutes, Maggie couldn’t stand it anymore.

‘What are we waiting for?’ She asked me.

‘Sh-h-h,’ Anne said. ‘Look… they’ll come.’

Maggie crossed her arms, biting back a sigh. The dew had soaked through her sneakers. Her feet were too cold, and her neck was too hot. There. There was a movement by a small cluster of trees. She squinted. A large, dark mass, which she had taken for a rock, shook itself. Then it stood.

And as it stood, another form emerged from the shadow of the trees, and the two animals circled each other briefly, and then loped gracefully into the sun.

Maggie’s mouth went dry.

Tigers…

She blinked. Impossible. But they were still there, and coming closer: two tigers, tigers, like you would find at a circus. Massive square heads and huge jaws, bodies muscled and rippling, coats glossy in the sun. Anne whistled sharply. Maggie jumped. Both tigers swung their heads toward

the sound, and Maggie lost her breath. Their eyes were flat, incurious, and old- impossibly old, as though instead of looking forward, their eyes saw back to a distant past. They ambled up to the fence, so close that Maggie stepped backward, quickly, terrified. So, close she could smell them, feel the heat of their bodies.

‘How?’ she finally managed to ask, which was not quite what she meant, but good enough. A thousand thoughts were colliding in her head.

‘More rescues,’ Anne said calmly.

‘They get sold on the black market. Sold, then abandoned when they’re too big, or put down when there’s no one to care for them.’ As she spoke, she reached her hand through a gap in the fence and petted one of the tigers-like it was an overgrown house cat.

When she saw Maggie gaping, she laughed. ‘They’re all right once they’ve been fed,’ she said. ‘Just don’t try and cuddle up when they’re

hungry.’ ‘I don’t-I won’t have to go in there, will I?’ Maggie was rooted to the ground, paralyzed with fear and wonder.

They were so big, so close. One of the tigers yawned, and she could make out the sharp curve of its teeth, white as bone.

Part: 7

‘No, no,’ Anne said. ‘Most of the time, I just chuck the food in through the gate. Here, I’ll show you.’ Anne walked her to the padlocked gate, which to Maggie looked alarmingly

flimsy. On the other side of the fence, the Tigers followed- languidly, as though by coincidence.

Maggie wasn't fooled, though. That's how predators were. They sat back and waited, lured you into feeling safe, and then they pounced. She wished Joh Joh were here. She did not wish Nat were here. Nat would flip. She hated big animals of any kind.

Even poodles made her jumpy. When they turned their backs on the Tigers' pen and returned to the house, Maggie's stomach started to unknot,

although she still had the impression the Tigers were watching her and kept picturing their sharp claws slotting into her back. Anne showed her where she kept all the keys to the sheds, hanging from neatly labeled hooks in the ‘mudroom,’ as she called it, where Maggie could also find spare rubber boots like the kind Anne wore, mosquito repellent, gardening shears, and suntan and calamine lotions.

After that, Maggie went to work. She fed the chickens while Anne instructed her how to scatter the feed,

and laughed out loud when the birds piled together, pecking frantically, like one enormous, feathered, many-headed creature.

Anne showed her how to chase the roosters back in the pen before letting out the dogs to run around, and Maggie was surprised that Muppet seemed to remember her, and immediately ran several times around her ankles, as though in greeting.

Then there was mucking the stables (as Maggie had suspected, this involved horse poop, but it wasn’t as

bad as she'd thought,) and brushing the horses' coats with special, stiff-bristled brushes. Then helping Anne prune the wisteria, which had begun to colonize the north side of the house. By this time, Maggie was sweating freely, even with her sleeves rolled up. The sun was high and hot, and her backache from bending over and straightening up again.

But she was happy, too-happier than she'd been in forever. She could almost forget that the rest of the world existed, that she'd ever been dumped

by Matt Hepley or made the Jump in the first place. Panic. She could forget Panic. She was surprised when Anne called an end to the day, saying it was almost one o'clock. While Maggie waited for Joh Joh to return for her, Anne made her a tuna sandwich with mayonnaise she'd made herself and tomatoes she'd grown in her garden. Maggie was afraid to sit down at the table since she was so dirty, but Anne set a place for her, so she did. She thought it was the best thing she'd ever eaten.'

Hey there, cowgirl,’ Joh Joh said when Maggie slid into the car. He still hadn’t changed out of his pajama pants. He made a big show of sniffing. ‘What’s that smell?’

‘Shut up,’ she said and punched him in the arm. He pretended to wince. As Maggie rolled down her window, she caught a glimpse of herself in the side mirror. Her face was red, and her hair was a mess and her chest was still wet with sweat, but she was surprised to find that she looked kind of - pretty.

‘How was it?’ Joh Joh asked as they began thumping down the drive again. He’d gotten her an iced coffee from 7-Eleven: lots of sugar, lots of creams, just how she liked it. She told him about the runt pig that had ballooned to a huge size, the horses, the chickens, and roosters. She saved the Tigers for last. Joh Joh was taking a sip of her coffee and nearly choked.

‘You know that’s illegal, right?’ he said. She rolled her eyes. ‘So are the pants you’re wearing. If you don’t tell, I won’t.’

‘These pants?’ Joh Joh pretended to be offended. ‘I wore these just for you.’

‘You can take them off just for me,’ Maggie said, and then blushed, realizing how it sounded.

‘Anytime,’ Joh Joh said, and grinned at her. She punched him again.

She was still fizzy with happiness. It was a twenty-minute ride back to downtown Carp, if the Motel 6, the post office, and the short string of greasy shops and bars could be counted

as downtown, but Joh Joh claimed to have figured out a shortcut.

Maggie went quiet when they turned onto Coral Lake, which couldn't have been more inaccurately named: there was no water in sight, nothing but fallen logs and patchy, burnt-bare stubs of trees, because of a fire that had raged there several years ago. The road ran parallel to Jack Donahue's property, and it was bad luck. Maggie had been on Coral Lake only a few times.

Trigger-Happy Jack was known for being constantly drunk, and half-insane, and for owning an arsenal of weapons. His property was fenced in and guarded by dogs and who knew what else. When his fence came into view, pushing right up to the road, she half expected him to come banging out of his house and start taking potshots at the car. But he didn't. Several dogs came running across the yard, though, barking madly. These dogs were nothing like Anne's. They were skinny, snarling, and mean-looking. They had almost passed the limits of Trigger-

Happy Jack’s property when something caught Maggie’s eye.

Part: 8

Sh*t-

I, NO!

Then Jack Donahue-paunchy, shirtless, wearing only a pair of saggy boxers-lifted his rifle and began to fire.

Pop…

Pop…

Pop…

Shots exploded- louder, sharper, than Marcel had expected, the first thing that had truly thrown him off guard. He'd never been so close to gunfire.

In the front yard, Trigger-Happy Jack was still screaming.

'You-cock-suckers-dead-as-a-doornail-I'll-bury-you-all-you-freakers!!!!'

Tick.

It wouldn’t be long now. Donahue would call the cops at some point. He’d have to.

Marcel sprinted around the house. His breath was caught somewhere in his throat, like each time he inhaled he was taking in the glass. He didn’t know what had happened to the other players, where Ray was, whether anyone had made it inside yet. He thought he heard a whisper in the dark-he assumed Maggie and Nat had taken up their positions, as planned. At the back of the house was a half-rotten

porch, cluttered with dark shapes - Marcel vaguely registered a refrigerator before he saw the distended screen door, barely hanging on its hinges. The shots were still cracking through the air. One two three four.

Tick…

He didn’t stop to think. He flung open the door.

He was in.

Part: 9

‘Stop!’ she nearly screamed.

‘Stop.’

Joh Joh slammed on the brakes.

‘What? Jesus, Maggie. What the hell?’

But she was already out of the car, jogging back toward a sagging scarecrow-at least, it looked like a scarecrow slumped on the ground, leaning back against Donahue’s fence. Her stomach was tight with fear, and she had the weirdest sense of being watched. There was something wrong with the dummy.

It was too crudely made, too useless. There were no farms on this side of Carroll Lake, no reason for a scarecrow, especially one that looked like it had been dumped from the trunk of a car.

When she reached the scarecrow, she hesitated for a second, as it might suddenly come to life and bite her. Then she lifted its head, which was slumped forward on a spindly stuffed neck.

In place of features, the scarecrow had words written neatly, in marker, on its blank canvas face.

FRIDAY, MIDNIGHT.

THE GAME MUST GO ON.

FRIDAY, JULY 1

Marcel THE CROWD WAS SMALLER ON FRIDAY NIGHT; THE atmosphere- tense, unhappy. Nervous. There was no beer, no music, no bursts of laughter. Just a few dozen people huddled silently fifty feet down the road from Trigger-Happy Jack’s fence,

massed together, lit up white-faced in the glare of the bouncing headlights.

When Joh- John cut the engine, Marcel could hear the sound of Nat's ragged breathing. Marcel had spent the ride trying to distract her by doing easy magic tricks, like making a joker appear in her jacket pocket and a penny vanish from her palm. Now he said, 'Just follow the plan, okay? Follow the plan and everything will be okay.'

Nat nodded, but she looked sick- like she might puke. She was deathly afraid of dogs; she had told

him. Also: ladders, heights, darkness, and the feeling you get in the middle of the night when you check your phone and see no one has texted. As far as he could tell, she was pretty much afraid of everything. And yet, she had decided to play. This made him like her even more. And she had chosen him, Marcel, as her ally.

Joh- John said nothing. Marcel wondered what he was thinking. He'd always thought Joh John was nice enough, and book smart for sure, but just like a big dumb sheepdog of a

person who followed Maggie everywhere. But- Marcel was starting to change his mind.

During the drive, Joh Joh's eyes had clicked to his for a second in the rearview, and Marcel had detected some kind of warning there. The night was clear and still.

The moon was high and halfway to full, and turning everything to the silhouette, drawing angles around the fence. Still, it was dark. A flashlight went on and off several times, a silent signal. Maggie, Joh Joh, Nat,

and Marcel walked toward it. Marcel had the urge to take Nat's hand, but Nat was hugging herself tightly.

At least Marcel had had time to plan, to prepare. If Nat hadn't told him about the dummy Maggie had spotted on Tuesday, he might not have known about the newest challenge until this morning. The email had come to all the players simultaneously from an encrypted address, judgmentfallingtooyou@gmail.com

Location: Coral Lake Road

Time: Midnight-

Goal: Take a prize from the house. Bonus: Find the desk in the gun room and take what's hidden there.

'All right.' Diggin was speaking quietly as they drew up close to the group. They were late. 'Players, step forward.'

They did, detaching themselves from the people who had come to watch. Fewer players, fewer spectators. After the bust, everyone was jumpy.

Part: 10

-And-

Carroll Lake Road was bad luck. Trigger- Happy Jack was bad-all bad. A psycho and a drunk and worse.

Marcel knew he wouldn't think twice about shooting them. The beam of a flashlight swept over each of the players in turn. It felt like the minutes were swelling into hours. The counting took forever.

Marcel could see Ray Hanrahan, chewing gum loudly, standing on the outer edge of the circle of players. His face was concealed in shadow. Marcel felt a familiar clutch of

anger. Strange how it didn't go away; over the past two years, it just seemed to be growing, like cancer in his stomach.

'Walsh is missing,' -Digging said finally. 'So is Merl.'

'They're out, then,' someone said.

'It's midnight.' -Digging was still practically whispering. The wind lifted the trees, hissed at them, as though it knew they were trespassing. The dogs were still quiet, though.

Sleeping, or waiting. ‘The second challenge-’

‘Second challenge?’ Zev broke in.

‘What about the water towers?’ ‘Invalidated,’ -Digging said. ‘Not everyone got to go.’ Zev spat on the ground, and Maggie made a noise of protest. -Digging ignored them.

‘When I say go,’ he said. He paused. For a moment, it seemed that everything went still. Marcel could feel the slow drum of his heart, beating in the hollow of his chest. And as they

stood there in the dark, waiting, it occurred to him that here, somewhere in this crowd, where the judges-hiding behind familiar faces, maybe enjoying it.

‘Go,’ -Digging said.

‘Go!’ Marcel said to Maggie and Nat, at the same time. Maggie nodded and took Nat’s hand; they vanished together into the dark, Nat moving stiff-legged, still limping slightly, like a broken doll.

Marcel made straight for the fence like they’d agreed like he’d

scoped the place out and knew what he was doing. And as he predicted, a half-dozen people ran after him in silence, doubled over as though, even now, they were being watched.

Nevertheless, much of the group didn't move right away. They floated aimlessly to the fence, pacing it, watching, too scared to try to climb. They'd all be disqualified for doing nothing. Still, they stood there, pacing, watching the dark house, watching the shadow-people climb the fence, everything silent except for the

occasional creak of metal, a muttered curse, and the wind. Marcel was one of the first up the fence. There were other players around him-people grunting and breathing hard, bodies knocking into, his-but he ignored them, focused on the bite of chain link on his palms and his breathing and the seconds running forward like water.

It was all about timing. Just like magic tricks: planning, mastery, staying calm under pressure. You could anticipate another person’s response; you could know what people would do,

or say, or how they would react, even before they did.

Marcel knew it wouldn’t be long until Donahue came out with a rifle. At the top of the fence, he hung back, even though his adrenaline was pumping, telling him to go. Several other people-it was too dark to make out faces-dropped and hit the ground first, and even though they barely made a sound, the explosion of barking came right away. Four dogs-no, five-tore out from the back of the house, barking like mad.

Marcel felt every second like it had a different taste, a different texture from the second before it, like individual moments were ticking off in his head.

Tick. Someone was screaming. There'd be points taken off for that. Tick. Only a few more seconds until the shooting would begin. Tick. Maggie and Nat should have reached the hole in the fence by now.

Tick…

He was airborne, and then he felt the impact of the ground and he

was up and fumbling for the Mace in his pocket.

He didn’t head for the front of the house directly but instead made a loop, circumnavigating the small crowd of players, the dogs going crazy, snarling, and snapping. Some of the players were already climbing the fence again, trying to reach the safety of the other side. But- Marcel kept going…

Tick…

A dog came at him. He almost didn’t see it; it had its jaws practically around his arm before he pivoted and

sprayed it, full-on, in the face. The dog dropped back, whimpering. Marcel kept going.

Tick.

Right on time, a light in the house clicked on. There was a roar-a sound that echoed out even over the chaos and the frantic sounds of barking and something crashed to the ground. A black shape rocketed out the front door, into the night. Even from a distance of one hundred yards, Marcel could make out the stream of individual courses.

#- Hashtag: (God damn mother freaking on and off b*tches get the hell off my yard you- pieces- of sh*t crapping d*ick wipe of as ass sucking pie hole puss-ie liker.)

Maggie-

MAGGIE AND NAT REACHED THE PLACE WHERE THE fence veered north, away from the road, just as the dogs began barking. Their timing was already all wrong. And Marcel was counting on them.

‘You got to move faster,’ Maggie said.

‘I’m trying,’ Nat said. Maggie could hear the strain in her voice. There was a volley of shouting from the yard-a a cry of pain and the snarling of an enraged animal. Maggie felt her pulse beating frantically in her neck.

Focus.

Focus.

Stay calm.

They had reached the portion of the fence they’d prepped yesterday. And no one had followed them. Good. Marcel had cut a makeshift door in the

fence. Maggie gave it a solid push and it groaned open, giving her just enough room to squeeze through. Nat followed.

Suddenly Nat froze, her eyes wide, horrified.

‘I’m stuck,’ she whispered.

Maggie whirled around, impatient.

Nat’s left sleeve was snagged on the fence. She reached out and tugged it free.

‘You’re unstuck,’ she said. ‘Come on.’

But Nat didn’t move. ‘I-I can’t.’ Her face was drawn, terrified. ‘I’m not even.’

‘You’re not what?’ Maggie was losing it. Marcel would be going in any minute; he expected them to stand guard.

They’d made a pact. He was helping them; Maggie didn’t know why, but she didn’t care, either.

‘I’m not even.’ Nat’s voice was high-pitched, hysterical. She was still standing, frozen, as though both legs had been rooted to the ground.

That’s when Jack Donahue came blasting from the front door.

‘God damn mother freaking sons of b*tches get the hell off my yard you- piece- of sh*t.’

‘Come on.’ Maggie grabbed Nat’s arm and pulled, hard, dragging her across the lawn toward the house, ignoring the sound of Nat’s whimpering, the words she was muttering under her breath. Counting. She was counting up to ten, then down again. Maggie dug her nails harder into Nat’s arm, almost wanting to hurt her.

Jesus. They were running out of time, and Nat was losing it. She didn't care about Nat's ankle, or that Nat was shaking, choking back sobs.

Pop…

Pop…

Pop…

Maggie jerked Nat down and into the shadows as Donahue thundered off the porch, gun up, firing. The light on the porch was white, half-blinding, and made him look like a

character from a movie. Maggie's thighs were shaking.

She didn't see Marcel. She couldn't see anyone-just shapes, blurring together in the darkness, and the small cone of light illuminating Donahue's back, the curl of hair on his shoulders, his flab, the awful butt of his rifle.

Where was Marcel? Maggie could hardly breathe. She pressed up against the side of the house, rocking her weight back onto her heels, trying to think. There was too much noise.

And she didn’t know if Marcel had made it into the house already. What if he hadn’t? What if he’d screwed up?

‘Stay here,’ Maggie whispered. ‘I’m going in.’ ‘Don’t.’ Nat turned to her; eyes wide, frantic. ‘Don’t leave me here.’ Maggie gripped her shoulders. ‘In exactly one minute, if I’m not out yet, I want you to run back to the car. Okay? In exactly one minute.’

She didn’t even know if Nat heard her and almost didn’t care, at this point. She straightened up. Her body felt bloated and clumsy. And

suddenly she registered several things at once: that the shots had happened, and were no longer happening; that the front door had just opened and closed with a firm click.

Someone had gone in.

Immediately, her body turned to ice. What if Marcel was inside? She, Maggie, was supposed to have been watching. She was supposed to have whistled if Donahue approached. But the front door had opened and closed. And she had not whistled.

She was no longer thinking. Instinctively, she pulled herself onto the porch and opened the front door, and slipped inside, into the hall. It stank of BO and old beer, and it was pitch-dark. Donahue had turned on a light earlier- that she had noticed, a bad omen, just as her left arm was snagged by the toothy bite of the fence- so why had he turned it off? Her heart surged into her throat and she reached out with both hands, grazed both walls lightly with her fingertips, centering herself in the hallway. She swallowed. She took several steps forward and

heard a rustling, the creak of a footstep. She froze, expecting at any second for the lights to click on, for the barrel of a gun to shine directly at her heart. Nothing happened.

‘Marcel?’ she risked whispering into the dark.

Footsteps crossed quickly toward her. She fumbled along the wall and hit a doorknob. The door opened easily, and she slipped out of the hall, closing the door as quietly as possible, holding her breath. But the footsteps kept going. She heard the front door

creak open and closed. Was- it Donahue? Marcel? Another player?

Here, moonlight filtered in through a large, curtainless window, and Maggie suddenly sucked in a breath. The walls were covered with metal, glinting dully in the milky light. Guns... Guns mounted on the walls, hanging from upended deer hooves, crisscrossing the ceiling. The gun room... She thought it even smelled faintly like gunpowder, but she might have been imagining it.

The room was cluttered with workbenches and overstuffed chairs, bleeding stuffing onto the floor. Underneath the window was a large desk. Maggie felt as if the air in the room were suddenly too thin; she felt breathless and dizzy, remembering the email she'd received that morning. Bonus: Find the desk in the gun room and take what's hidden there.

Maggie moved across the room to the desk, navigating the clutter of objects. She began with the drawers on the sides-right and then left. Nothing.

The shallow central drawer was loose, as though from frequent use. The gun was curled there, like an enormous black beetle, shiny, hard-backed.

The bonus. She reached in, hesitated-then seized it quickly as it might bite her. Maggie felt nausea rising in her throat.

She hated guns.

‘What are you doing?’ Maggie spun around. She could just see Marcel silhouetted in the doorway, although it was too dark to make out his face.

‘Sh-h-h,’ Maggie whispered. ‘Keep your voice down.’

‘What the hell are you doing?’

Marcel took two steps across the room.

‘You were supposed to keep watch.’

‘I was.’ Before Maggie could explain further, Marcel cut her off.

‘Where’s Natalie?’

‘Outside,’ Maggie said. ‘I thought

I heard-’

‘Was this some kind of a trick?’

I’ll have to find out…